



Roanoke, Virginia

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“A Second Language of Faith”

Proverbs 8:22-31

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The last *Worship and Music Committee* meeting got me tickled. We were meeting by Zoom (what else is new?) and the topic was fan placement during worship. I was offering a summary of guidance that was coming on the one hand from scientists who study aerosols who say that any air movement is *bad* because it spreads tiny aerosols across a room, and COVID-19 researchers who say that a little air movement is *good* because it dissipates large droplets, the primary way the virus is spread. Right in the middle of explaining all this, I heard myself. Here I was, an ordained *Minister of the Word and Sacrament*, **giving a science briefing**. I got tickled and started laughing which got the members of the committee laughing.

But today, I can hear voices in my head asking, “**What’s so funny?**” They are the voices of my seminary theology professors, Ottati and Leith.

- First John Leith, who is blunt: “**You’re a Presbyterian minister, aren’t you?**”
- Then John Ottati who is wordy: “**Were you paying attention when we taught you that the great Reformers wanted to purge the faith of all superstition and that in emphasizing rationality the Reformation opened the way for the blossoming of the sciences?**”
- Then blunt Leith again, “**So, do your job! If there is a virus amuck that targets the most vulnerable, be a good shepherd of your flock and learn your stuff. Science is the friend of Presbyterians.**”

These voices are reminding me that Presbyterians, by tradition, are quite rational (I know that I am talking about being rational while also speaking of hearing voices in my head, but I’m going with it).



It would be wrong for me to suggest that Presbyterians are the only Christian friends Science has. And it would be wrong for me to suggest that the Reformers were the first to say such things. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the lot did not think they were the first. They saw themselves as “Reminders,” not “Inventers.” They felt that among the peasantry the Medieval Church had promoted superstition to increase the magical power of priests, and they wanted to *remind* Christians of the biblical witness that it is idolatry to act like gods and *make up things we want to be true*. The Reformers firmly believed what St. Augustine expressed as “[Faith seeking understanding](#).” Those who worship the God of Creation, the God of truth, are to seek the real, not the wistful.

The Wisdom Literature of the Bible is particularly strong with this message, and it comes across clearly in the book of Proverbs. Wisdom Literature is less “[Thus saith the Lord](#)” and more “[God has given us this world, what can we learn from it?](#)”. The Wisdom writers sought God’s truth, however it is revealed, and were particularly fascinated with what could be learned from the world in which we live. A Torah scholar might be happiest inside a synagogue pouring over a scroll. A wisdom scholar might be happiest being outside and looking up from the scroll to take in the world around her. Why? Because wisdom comes when faith studies the world.

Wisdom comes *when faith studies the world*.

Hey, maybe instead of me talking so much about Wisdom, I ought to let Wisdom introduce herself as she does in our passage.

So, Wisdom, tell us about yourself.

²² The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—

²⁶ when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.

²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,

²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,

³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.



The voice of Wisdom, the Word of the Lord.
(Thanks be to God!)

“Thank you, Wisdom, nice to get to know you. I have to say, we have a connection, you and me. You speak to the philosophy major I once was. And I think others have that connection too, like the ones

- who love to look through a telescope and the ones who love to look through a microscope.
- or who are fascinated with rock formations and delighted when fossils are found with their clues about what once was,
- or who study the migration of birds,
- or who love to figure out new recipes that are delicious and healthy,
- or who wonder how fermentation works and why spirits have different flavors depending on where they are brewed,
- or who spend hours studying the weather,
- or who marvel at artificial intelligence and who worry about where it might lead,
- or who love having their minds blown by what physicists have to say and then enjoy science fiction that puts their visions into stories,
- or who....

“No, I’ll stop. What I am saying, Wisdom, is that even though many don’t know your name, there are millions who are about what you are about. I am speaking of all those who want to see, touch, study and discover the inner workings of things.”

Well, I was hearing voices in my head and now I’m talking to a passage like it’s a person (The nice thing about masks and an empty sanctuary is that I don’t have to see your look of concern).

My hearing voices aside, I do want to point out that the passage does speak as a person named Sofia... as Wisdom. Sophia is a wise woman. Maybe a grandmother who has seen it all and learned a lot. She has been around a long time, she tells us. She once was, she tells us,

- the truth before reality,
- theory before practice,
- what has to be before it becomes.

What I mean by that is that she tells us that all the truth about how the world works was in place before the world came to be. Truth was true even before there was anyone to ask’s Pilate’s question, “[What is truth?](#)”

Before I get too philosophical, I will ground what I am saying in some of the images of that Sophia uses.



She told us that

- before springs burst forth, the truth that water would seek its lowest point was already in place.
- Before mountains were brought forth—
 - before there ever were Blue Ridge Mountains to hug us,
 - or the Himalayas to intimidate us,
 - or the massive and isolated strata volcanic mountains on the Cascade Volcanic Arc, to inspire us as they point to the heavens
 - the truth about how they came to be by earth upheavals or volcanic explosions was already in place.
- Before there were groves of olive trees or fields of grain, the truth of what we call biology was already in place.

In other words, the amazing rationality of God’s creation was in place before there ever were humans who could reason. The wonders of how nature works was in place before there ever were humans to learn it.

I can put this negatively too:

- Before there ever was the ability to lie, there was truth.
- Before there ever were the practices of spinning and cheery-picking facts, there was truth.
- Before there ever was a desire to ignore what is real because it doesn’t suit one’s purposes or agenda,

the true was *true*.

Now, the Wisdom writers themselves didn’t know all that is true. Sure, they thought the world was flat. Big deal. So did everybody else. They didn’t know about aerosols, how stars implode or how cancers grow. But please don’t sound both arrogant and naïve and put down what they thought they knew. They were as excellent students of the world as there ever has been. In the context of their times, what they knew and understood about how the world works puts most generations to shame.

[And why they were so devoted to studying the world around them?](#) The answer may surprise those who think that religion and superstition are the same word. They were such outstanding students of the real because they passionately believed in a Creator. They saw the study of creation as a means of praise.

They saw the study of nature as a means of praise. It is no leap to say that if they had been introduced to modern science, they would have seen scientific study as a means of praising God.

In that sense, they are so far ahead of many today who live in the Western world. Since the Enlightenment, many have developed this idea—this *unbiblical* idea—that faith and science do not belong in the same room. This idea is played out in one of two ways.

First, there is this notion that science and faith *can co-exist but need to stay out of each other’s way*. Faith begins where science ends. Science is about what can be proven, and faith is about what we



have to trust to be true, and the more that science proves, the less faith has to tell us. The more territory that is claimed by science, the less there is to believe. As knowledge grows, God shrinks.

For the Wisdom writers, that's nonsense. Faith doesn't begin when knowing ends. Not a true and living faith anyway. Faith is a trust that then fuels the knowing. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," Proverbs says. What is meant by that is that faith in God is the lens by which we understand what we know and don't know. The Wisdom writers studied the change of seasons, the migration of birds, the habits of ants and the movement of rivers making their way to the sea, and they learned lessons that helped them live both with more realism and with greater awe of God's handiwork.

The second notion goes even further. It is the idea that *faith and science represent two worldviews that are opposed to each other*. To be on the scientific side of the divide is to see believers as truth deniers. "You believe the book of Genesis? Well just wait a minute, and I'll google all kinds of things about fossils, black holes, and evidence of evolution that will blow your faith out of the water that you think could cover the whole earth."

On the other side of the divide, believers are to be God-defenders which means taking offence at any explanation that doesn't square up with a surface reading of scripture. So, disagreements about six days of creation, sexual orientation, or miracles become win-at-all-cost-arguments where God's very existence is at stake.

And Grandmother Sophia? She just rolls her eyes at both groups and sighs. It tests her patience because she knows neither side gets it.

In saying that Truth was with God before the world was made, Sophia is telling us that we will never be gods and know the whole truth. The best we can hope for is *to be wise*. Wisdom is to have a heart of faith that loves God and God's world, and a mind that knows how to learn a thing or two.

Maybe it would be helpful at this time to listen to voices that are not in my head, or not in the head of the writer of Proverbs who speaks for Sophia. Recently, *Cynthia Lawrence* sent me a link to a conversation between a Christian theologian who loves science and a scientist who is a devout Christian. Both are powerhouses in their fields. N.T. Wright is one of the most celebrated biblical scholars of our day, and Francis Collins is one of the most celebrated scientists of our day. Dr. Collins, the Director of the National Institute of Health, is the geneticist who led the Human Genome Project and who helped discover genes connected to a variety of diseases (I'll include a link to their conversation in the text of my sermon.)¹

The two were talking about what the voices in my head were talking about at the beginning of this sermon. In the face of the pandemic, Christians who are interested in justice and compassion need to learn first what the scientists are saying. If the goal is to serve the greater good, with particular concern for those who are most vulnerable—the elderly and the poor—then we need to listen to the science. As Wright puts it, Theology needs to learn a second language. In order to be fluent in modern compassion, we need to speak in fluent science.

¹ <https://biologos.org/podcast-episodes/n-t-wright-francis-collins-a-christian-response-to-coronavirus>



Collins agreed. (And by the way, it is wonderful to listen to such a brilliant scientist speak so passionately and warmly about his faith. The two of them even conclude their conversation singing a song about Genesis that they wrote. It's fun.)

I agree with Wright and Collins. I don't think that preachers, politicians or media personalities on TV or radio should be the first voices we listen to when it comes to something like a virus, or the climate, or sexual orientation, or whether God will let the virtuous as well as the sinful be harmed by a hurricane.

I'll tell you why, and I'll limit it to us preachers even though a version of it is true for all other non-scientists. Preachers who skip over the study of what is real in the world are nearly always going to preach a "Wannabe-Gospel" rather than a "How-It-Is-Gospel."

To preach a "How-It-Is-Gospel," I need to let science speak for itself... because something like a virus is neutral and doesn't care a bit about how persuasive I am with my pleas in a sermon as to how it should behave. We have no chance to baptize the virus, get it in a Confirmation Class, and change its heart so that it learns to behave. The virus doesn't care a bit whether we are religious or not, whether we are Presbyterian or Buddhist, whether we are Republican or Democrat. Before I can begin to think and talk about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ during a pandemic, I need to get to know the virus on its own terms. Then, we can think about how we can be wise as to

- what we should do to balance protecting lives and livelihoods,
- how to promote mental and emotional wellbeing,
- how to educate children and how to continue to be the church.

The climate doesn't care what preachers want to be true. Nor Republicans or Democrats. Climate doesn't care, it just is. It just happens. And if there are cycles of weather that have nothing to do with anything that we can do, it's good to find that out. And if it does matter in part what we do, that there is an impact on the climate because of emissions, then it is good to find that out too, whether or not we want it to be true... whether or not it serves our personal, business or political preferences. Let's learn, then let's worry about policy and what we should do to be good and compassionate Christians in this world.

We can just march down a list of ethical issues pertaining to the natural world. Over and over again, the point remains that people of faith, in order to glorify the Creator, should praise God by learning what we need to learn of creation. Let's learn what the science is

- about what we eat and what we inhale,
- what we genetically engineer and what we grow,
- how the ways we discover to extend life impact the quality of life.

That's the guidance of the Wisdom Writers. They help us understand that heaven and earth should never be separated. To put that into today's terms—and using the words of the great rabbi,



Jonathan Sacks—religion and science ought to be “a great partnership.”² When faith learns to speak the language of science, faith becomes the worldview, and science becomes the tool. The end is a greater wisdom about living as God’s children in God’s real world.

So, let’s learn, and by doing so, praise God.

² As quoted in the Wright/Collins conversation.

